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The Rhetoric of the EU Referendum Campaign – Andrew S. Crines

The referendum campaign was a long time coming. Approximately 26 years, in fact. This is because the Conservative Party have been at loggerheads over how to manage the UK’s relationship with the European Union since Margaret Thatcher was deposed. It was an important point in laying the foundations for Conservative disunity, as Europe ended up contributing towards her demise. In 1990, Geoffrey Howe resigned over how her attitude had made dealing with the EU almost impossible. His often over quoted line symbolised that attitude: ‘It is rather like sending your opening batsmen to the crease only for them to find, the moment the first balls are bowled, that their bats have been broken before the game by the team captain.’ Weeks later, Thatcher was gone, and the Tory Party was traumatised.

Subsequently, Thatcher’s departure and the grievances over Europe undermined party unity over the course of John Major’s premiership, and when they returned to opposition, it remained a constant theme. In 2001, it was there during Hague’s election campaign where, he argued ‘talk about Europe and they call you extreme. Talk about tax and they call you greedy. Talk about crime and they call you reactionary. Talk about immigration and they call you racist; talk about your nation and they call you Little Englanders’. And in 2005, the longstanding hostility was again present, embodied by the ‘are you thinking what we’re thinking’ posters which led the Conservatives message on anti-immigration. It took three defeats in a row before they were ready to listen to David Cameron’s argument that they should talk about something the voters care about and should stop ‘banging on about Europe’. With the issues unresolved, they did.

Reflecting on the rhetoric of the referendum campaign itself, the Vote Leave side emerged victorious by positioning their arguments in long-standing assumptions about how the UK was being mistreated by the EU. Immigration, loss of sovereignty, expense of membership, and a growing sense of a detached liberal intelligentsia that failed to understand the plight faced by the poorest in society or the issues of a cultural shift in the UK. Contrasting this, the Remain side sought to highlight the benefits of access to the single market, fiscal stability, the free movement of people and ideas, and also the potential risk to the economy by withdrawing from the EU. These distinct rhetorical positions can be analysed using the Aristotelean modes of persuasion which are *pathos, logos* and *ethos.*

Rhetorically, the Leave side used appeals to *pathos* whilst the Remain side relied more upon *logos-*driven arguments. This significant difference framed the kind of arguments both sides would use. For example, by appealing to *pathos* the Leave side were able to use fear of immigration and the potential risks of Turkey joining the European Union to instil a sense of dread of the future. Aided by a sympathetic media, the Leave side were well positioned to mould their narrative during the debates and through sympathetic tabloids. Contrasting this, the Remain side used *logos* by highlighting the economic benefits of immigration, the unlikeliness of an immediate application from Turkey to join the EU, and that the UK gains considerable social and economic benefits from membership. So, why did the Leave side win the argument?

Put simply, the Leave side appealed successfully to the third of Aristotle’s rhetorical devices, namely *ethos*. This concerns character and credibility. Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage construct a persona that seems to be likable and open, whilst constructing David Cameron and others such as John Major and Tony Blair represented a distant establishment. The premise surrounding this rhetorical strategy concerns convincing the audience (or voter) that their background and abilities reflect their own. In the case of Leave they argued that understood and sympathised with the voters and their concerns. Given the greater likelihood of the older sections of the electorate to vote, the Leave side sought to reflect the concerns of the ‘baby boomer’ generation. Thus, arguing that the EU is a distant force that undermines British identity and that immigration has swamped the UK with alien customs and/or ideas. Contrasting this, the Remain side sought to articulate a more positive message targeted at the potential opportunities for the ‘Millennials’. However, given their hesitation to vote, this strategy proved problematic. As a consequence, the Leave side were able to appeal to *ethos* more than the Remain side and to a greater number of the electorate.

On reflection, there are a number of rhetorical strategies that had been employed by both sides which can and do explain the outcome. Remain’s appeals to *logos* were designed to highlight the benefits of the status quo, whilst Leave’s use of *pathos* sought to demonstrate the dangers of the EU and its ongoing threat. Ultimately, however, it was the successful appeals to *pathos*, combined with *ethos* that rhetorically swung it for Leave.